

As we were moving the sheep flock from the south eighty to the home place a week or so ago, I started thinking about the way we speak to our livestock. I should have been looking around a little more carefully instead, since the Icelandic ewes Malin and Helga--along with their entourage of lambs and grown offspring that hang around with them--were in the back reaches of the pasture, browsing on willow brush. Fortunately, I noticed that Malin--a black ewe whose absence is readily noticed--was not with the flock, so I went back to the corner of the pasture and started them for home.

But, my original thoughts returned, and I began wondering again about the terms we use with our animals. Why don't we speak to all of them with the same words?

We have always moved sheep away from us with a high pitched "shoo, shoo" repeated several times. We call them to us with an equally shrill "sheeeep! sheeeep!" They will come, bleating, at that sound. My dad could call the sheep from an incredible distance. The sound of his voice carried very well, and they knew who it was and where to go.

In fact, all of my uncles had voices that carried well. The four who farmed within half a mile of each other sometimes carried on conversations by voices that traveled over the fields between them. They had no trouble hearing one another.

We chase cattle by a completely different word than we use for sheep. Instead of "shoo" in a high pitch, we yell "hike!" in much lower tones. The cattle, too, respond to this sound. And when we call the cattle, it is "co, boss! co, boss!" They know what that means, as well. The two cows we milk, though, come best to "Effie, get down here! Buttercup, come on now!" Since they are in a pasture away from the other cattle, there is no confusion about the directive.

And, as is traditional, if a cow is restless during milking, we soothe her with "so, boss, so boss." That usually works, though I do remember learning some less than polite words while my dad was milking a cow that liked to kick.

Many people call dogs with "come!" We have usually used "here!" or "here, Duke!" With cats, we invoke the usual "kitty, kitty!" that only

works if the cat is interested in coming to us. It doesn't matter much what one says to a cat if the cat has other plans.

So, our person to animal communication is quite specific. Maybe I should try cross-species signals just to see how they work. I wonder if border collie Fly would come to "kitty, kitty!" Probably she would, if she suspected that food was involved.